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Telegraph



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EPERON'S GREECE
UNDISCOVERED ISLANDS

CASH COURSE
LEARN TO MANAGE MONEY

At St Bride's, deep in Donegal, Victorian values reign, and those who feel oppressed by the tawdriness of the modern world find their freedom. But is it all as it seems? Report by Candida Crewe. Photographs: Phil Starling



ASPIC AND OLD LACE

'No, the name Gorbachev doesn't ring any immediate bell,' Priscilla Langridge, a Victorian, told me.

'What about Mrs Thatcher?'

'Yes, I know about her. But I don't really think about her at all.'

'Did you know about the Falklands, for example?'

'Funnily enough we did because somebody mentioned it to us, didn't they Miss Tyrrell? Yes, a gentleman of our acquaintance let it slip that England was at war.'

It was not the first time that day that I thought I was a character in a Gothic novel. The conversation was taking place in a sinister establishment called St Bride's. It is in a small remote village on the bleak coast of Donegal, a good three hours' drive from Belfast, and is run by a handful of folk who have opted to eschew modern life. They,

and those of similar inclinations who go to stay there, prefer to live the Victorian life, or that of the 1930s. It is not a school or hotel, but a retreat for 'Romantics' who wish to deny the existence of the present and all its unfortunate characteristics.

I arrived at the house at dusk. It is a large grey-white building with a cracked façade. The rain slashed down as if the director of a Daphne du Maurier film had gone overboard with the special effects. A single candle blinked behind a lace curtain in a ground-floor window. The biting wind was not the only thing about the place that chilled me.

Ten minutes after I knocked, the door was answered by a young girl who was dressed in a maid's uniform.

'This is the tradesman's entrance,' she said, and ordered me to the front





**St Bride's, top left, and its
eccentric inhabitants, above,
from left: Miss Tyrrell, Miss
Langridge, Miss Raynor,
Miss Walsingham and Sophia**

door. Inside, the dank hall, with black stairs and banisters, was unlit. I was led into the 'parlour', a grim room to say the least. The feeble coal fire seemed to have given up hope in its battle against the cold.

'I'll just go and fetch my mistress,' the maid told me. I sat at the table, upon which was a sombre carpet cloth. On the walls there were 1840s prints of women in bonnets. Two vases sprouting peacock feathers stood on the mantelpiece.

A while later my hostess, Miss Clare Tyrrell, made a sweeping entrance. A large woman in her forties, she was wearing a long black dress with a crinoline and a white lace collar. Around her shoulders was a light shawl. She had gold-rimmed spectacles and rosy cheeks. Her hair was plaited into two buns above each ear. Had I not been so spooked, I might have giggled.

She greeted me formally, rang for tea and excused herself in order to fetch her friend and permanent guest. It was some time before the egg-mayonnaise sandwiches, the fruit-cake and Miss Langridge appeared. The latter looked much the same as Miss Tyrrell, but her double chin was more far-reaching and she had an even more pronounced penchant for pale blue eye-shadow. Her lips were primly pursed and she sat down with her hands clasped. They reminded me irresistibly of Hinge and Bracket. Their voices were more sugary, though, and humour was not a characteristic for which I shall remember them. They took themselves extremely seriously.

'Like all Romantics, we share a disdain for modern life. Such tawdriness!' Miss Tyrrell explained. 'Everything is so jaded. We love style and elegance. This is expressed by our wanting to be gracious and demure Victorians.'

Miss Langridge nodded in agreement. 'It's an aesthetic thing,' she said. 'We don't like cars or fridges, for example, not so much because of what they do, but because of the indignity of their design. I've never come across anything beautiful in the name of safety or convenience.'

'Can I interrupt a moment,' Miss Tyrrell chipped in with exaggerated civility, 'to say I'll have to leave you to prepare the salmon for dinner. Everything is a little chaotic because the housekeeper has had to go to Belfast to collect Miss Walsingham.'

'Oh, so you have a car?' I enquired. 'She didn't go in a pony and trap. Miss Crewe,' came the curt reply.

'What sort is it?' 'It's a blue one,' she informed me before going off to the kitchen.

Left alone with Miss Langridge, I wondered about her past. On this

subject she was vague but I did gather that, though English, she had been brought up in Ireland and educated by a governess.

'My father died when I was three. My mother didn't approve of schools. As a teenager I travelled around England with an aunt. We went to Oxford. I decided I wanted to study there—the idea seemed romantic. I did in the end do so in an unofficial sort of way for a year with my companion, Miss Faulkener. I was about twenty and she was reading history at Lady Margaret Hall. She's more of a 1930s sort of person. Sometimes I call her Jennipops.'

I asked about finances. 'Miss Faulkener took care of them,' she

and looked relieved when, at that moment, her friend reappeared.

Together they began to explain to me about the household. St Bride's is, apparently, owned by Miss Tyrrell. She, Miss Langridge, the housekeeper Miss Raynor and Sophia the maid are the only four residents. But they have guests of similar persuasions. About three years ago they opened the schoolroom upstairs for adult 'pupils' interested in experiencing an old-fashioned childhood. There weren't many takers, so now they busy themselves by going for walks, 'having ideas' and contributing articles and short stories to their magazine *The Romantic*. This is an exceptionally precious publication illustrated



answered. Money was something, she implied, which had never ruffled her existence—together with a range of other relatively minor details such as modern politics, music, art, literature and so forth. (She admitted to having read no book written since 1939. She had been put off James Joyce having heard from an Irish librarian that he was a 'rough-talkin', wild-spoken man'. Likewise Graham Greene, whom she considered to be 'unsound'. And what of Francis Bacon? 'You mean the seventeenth-century essayist?')

Miss Langridge had returned home from England to write. She published 'mostly with friends'. I asked after her friends. Had there ever been any admirers? Did she intend to marry at any time in the future?

'Goodness me, Miss Crewe, I cannot predict fate but I wouldn't deny the possibility,' she said, breathless,

with silhouettes of ladies with parasols. The columns are called things like 'Pippit's Pippie Page' and 'Parlez-Vous Romantique?' ('One enquires about the geography of the house when asking for the lavatory.')

Their source of income turns out to be absurdly incongruous: computers. They adapt stories into games and currently have five on the market. They sell in W.H. Smith's at £10 each.

'You see,' my hostess said, 'most people earn a living and have a private life on the side. We lead our life and earn our living on the side. We have to take advantage of our talents to lead this kind of life. Computer games are an interesting form of fiction. We like writing fairy tales so we can use our imaginations and indirectly enhance our lifestyle.'

'We're not programmers,' Miss Langridge chipped in. 'We're writers.'



Past perfect: Miss Walsingham, above left, is a 1930s person. Miss Tyrrell, above, sits in the Golden Phoenix room, complete with period books, right. In the parlour, above right, Miss Langridge shuns the camera





'I don't understand computers at all. I just think of them as magic,' the mistress of the house continued.

'I'm not particularly against technical innovation, I just so dislike the look of them,' her friend said. 'Would that they were made of walnut and fitted with ivory keys.' She paused. 'We've just written "Jack the Ripper – another ripping game". We were keen to do a Victorian detective story. It's the first ever X-rated computer game because I read the original police reports very carefully and used their

descriptions of the dead bodies.' Miss Langridge's smile was menacingly ingratiating. The room suddenly seemed very dark and I shivered. It was a bad moment.

My lack of ease was not helped by the arrival of my fellow guest: Miss Walsingham, a striking 1930s lady, who appeared with a peroxide bob, a white-powdered face, bright crimson lips, a pencil skirt, a cream silk shirt and high heels. So appropriate for the wilds of Donegal. She spoke in a voice that would have made



Like all Romantics, we share a disdain for modern life. Such tawdriness! We love style and elegance. This is expressed by our wanting to be gracious and demure Victorians'

from me and that I create my own ambience.'

I asked how she travelled about.

'On the underground,' she twittered. 'I'm lucky on the Northern Line for we occasionally get the old trains, you see. In fact I was first acquainted with *The Romantic* on one. A girl sitting opposite me in a dashing red costume handed it to me. I then wrote to Miss Tyrrell. That's a typical example of one of those twists of fate which brings us Romantics together.'

Was this a holiday?

'Sort of, yes, a holiday, yes, a very brief holiday till Sunday.'

I asked after her past. She affected to know little about it, complying with *The Romantic's* philosophy that 'Ignorance is bliss ... You can tell a Romantic by what he doesn't know. The line between deliberate and natural ignorance is a thin one. After a while one *does* forget ...'

a manicured nail seem unrefined. 'They served a very nice afternoon tea on the airline. I was pleasantly surprised,' she cheeped.

How long had her journey taken from Belfast?

'Oh, goodness, I can't be too sure. It certainly took some time, yes, quite a while. I'm afraid I'm not very good on things like that. You'll have to ask my maid.' (Despite my pleas I never was allowed to meet the mysterious Bridget. Did she really exist?)

Miss Walsingham, it transpired, lives in Clapham South with a female companion and is plainly economical in her observation. She doesn't notice 'modern things' in London. Skyscrapers, for example.

'You mean high buildings? I tend not to focus on them,' she told me. 'I don't know how much I notice anything. I really feel the world recedes

She managed to recall that she had been born in Australia and that her parents live in Africa (as to where exactly, her mind was 'blank'). She has had part-time jobs only – as a dresser at the English National Opera and in an antique market. She is supported financially by her parents and by her companion which is fortunate because, personally, she finds anything to do with money insupportable. Sometimes she cooks a bit of pasta. 'But I don't make spaghetti bolognese like those people in bedsits.'

'I presumed to ask Miss Langridge her age. Might I presume to ask you the same?' I enquired.

'Ooooh,' she quivered and fanned her face with her hand. 'No, I think

that's a little too presumptuous. Let's just say mid-twenties.'

At this point Miss Tyrrell invited us next door into the 'Golden Phoenix'. 'May I just say before I encourage you in, it's a very special place, a club we have when we're entertaining.'

The 'Golden Phoenix' turned out to be a damp and dusty room across the hall with two small tables with lace cloths and a wind-up gramophone. The books on the shelves, which all appeared to be published *circa* 1920, had titles like *Nancy at St Bride's* and *The Happy Girl's Book*.

'Have you brought your glass, Miss Langridge?' her mistress asked.

'Oh no, I quite forgot.'

'Well, I haven't got my sherry yet so that's two bits of forgettings,' she giggled prissily and took her leave.

I took the opportunity to try and understand Miss Walsingham. I asked what her family thought of her.

'I have a feeling my brother thinks I'm a little odd, yes, I have that impression. His wife seems to think so, but she's very boring. They have a sheep farm in New Zealand.'

Miss Tyrrell returned.

'May I interrupt for just a moment? I've just lit the paraffin lamp in the parlour and the oil is smelling. I was worrying you might still be susceptible to

headaches, Miss Langridge, so I think I'd better turn it off.'

'Oh, yes, I think so, Miss Tyrrell.'

'And I do believe we now have a call to dress for dinner.'

They all shuffled away excitedly. Sophia came in to attend to the fire. She was more forthcoming than the others. Kneeling beside the coals she told me she was twenty-one and was from a 'nice semi' in a Midlands town.

'I went to a comprehensive. My dad's an engineer. I spotted a copy of *The Romantic* in a bookshop and I've been here a month.' She is not paid: it is a 'vocation', not a job. 'My father always said I was born out of time. I'm so different – quieter and more serious. At the moment my parents think I'm on holiday. When the time is right I'll tell them I've gone to lead the old-fashioned life.'

Before I discovered more, she was called away to take Miss Walsingham's bags upstairs.

We sat down to dinner at midnight, Miss W now in a black velvet and white satin coat, glittery sandals and clutching a white lace handkerchief 'to drop at the appropriate moment'. We ate overdone salmon and vegetables, followed by delicious 'Mrs Beeton' syllabub. Miss Langridge felt it permissible to relate an anecdote about the

inventor of the 'brassière', seeing, she said, 'as we aren't in mixed company'.

Perhaps rather feebly, I opted not to stay the night, and checked into a hotel five miles away. The next day, though, I returned for breakfast as arranged, at the appointed time of nine o'clock. Breakfast was a choice of omelettes, kippers and fried kidneys on toast, but there was an unfathomable delay. It did not actually appear until midday. (What were they *doing*?)

Before it was served I had bumped into the housekeeper ('of colonial stock') who was carrying a bowl of lavender water, and asked if I could see the kitchen. This request threw the household into a frenzy of whispered consultations, the outcome of which was completely inexplicable. I was allowed to see the kitchen, it was decided, but only from the *outside*. This entailed going out into a freezing blizzard and peering into the third window along – but then only to be faced with Miss Langridge waving to me from within and virtually obliterating my paltry view. I did, though, manage to glimpse a grubby green range and crumbs.

I was not allowed to see the bedrooms at all. When I went up to investigate (on the pretext of 'visiting the geography') I was swiftly followed

by Miss Tyrrell who reprimanded me with a matronly frown.

Just before leaving I escaped to a bar across the road to buy a bottle of Irish Guinness. There, I entreated the locals to tell me more about their quaint neighbours.

'You mean the Silver Sisters? If you've been staying there it's no wonder you're a bit pale. Get a bit of a smack in the schoolroom, did you?' one of the fishermen laughed, friendly. 'No, they're harmless really, a quiet lot, keep themselves to themselves.'

I paid my *punt* for the beer. I was not much wiser about those of whose unusual hospitality I had been the recipient. Who were they *really*? Did the other characters of whom they spoke, but who I was prevented from meeting, actually exist? What exactly *was* hidden in the rooms I wasn't allowed to see? How significant were all their whispered secrets? And, finally, did they actually believe that I was convinced by their fantasy world?

As I hurtled away from the place that afternoon like – as the apt cliché goes – a bat out of hell, I found myself unable to answer any of these questions. But I consoled myself when safely back at home with the welcome discovery that I was not, after all, a character in a Gothic novel. ■